
The Mesopotamian Temple

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II. THE MESOPOTAMIAN TEMPLE

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In the marshy canebrakes of Lower Mesopotamia worshippers of still undetermined ethnical affinities constructed boats (Fig. 7), fenced off sacred enclosures, wove dais-shaped windscreens and elaborate reed-huts to house their images and other worshiped objects as long ago as the end of the fourth millennium, B. C. The rare pictorial representations allow us only a few glimpses of the religious activity enacted in these reed-sanctuaries.¹ This aquatic past left sundry traces in the ritual practices, the sacred furniture of the later temples, as well as in the material features of their architecture.² To this we trace back naval processions, the use of reed-huts for certain rites, altars made of reed, and other customs.

With the invention of sun-dried bricks was ushered in the epoch of monumental temple-architecture. The oldest extant brick-buildings were devoted to the gods. On a mound of clean earth a rectangular and symmetrical temple was lifted high above the level of secular human life; three naves and, most probably, a second story feature an imposing structure in whose white-faced walls numerous doors opened in three directions (Fig. 8). Yet, this temple was still an experiment, an attempt to create a sacred building to shelter the deity, its worshippers and their cult. Though the architectural technique — rectangular and symmetrical planning, recessed brick-walls, colored facing, etc. — was accepted as norm for all future edifices of that type, the characteristic features of the building itself (that is: location on a mound, accessibility through numerous doorways, and arrangement of the rooms) seem nevertheless to have been rejected as adequate expressions of the religious concepts of the community. Whether it was because this concept was still in actual evolution or because there were successive ethnical or political changes in the community, new types of temple-architecture appear and disappear in Mesopotamia³ until, towards the end of the third millennium, the perfect expression was finally achieved by the creative religious genius of the temple-builders. A pattern was thus set to be followed conscientiously by all Babylonian architects until this civilization disappeared.⁴

THE TYPICAL MESOPOTAMIAN TEMPLE

The old sanctuary was replaced by two buildings: one aloft on the mound, the dimensions of which were considerably increased and which was to become the marvel of the Near Eastern world (Fig. 9), the other on the level soil. The tower (*siqquratu*) was destined to receive the deity alighting there in its descent from heaven, while the lower building, with the ground-plan of a typical South-Babylonian private house, was to be the abode of the god when staying on earth. None of the small sacred structures erected on top of the stage-tower has survived, exposed as they were

1. Cf. the article of L. H. Vincent "La Représentation divine orientale archaïque" in *Mélanges Syriens* . . . A. R. Dussaud (Paris 1939), 373 ff.

2. Cf. e. g. E. Heinrich, *Schilf und Lehm, ein Beitrag zur Urgeschichte der Sumerer* (Studien z. Bauforschung, Vol. VI, 1934).

3. The article of V. Mueller "Types of Mesopotamian Houses" in JAOS LX, 151 ff. will inform the reader with regard to these questions and the pertinent literature.

4. The short-lived innovations which appear very rarely in the period of the Cassite rulers are not discussed here.

to the inclemencies of the weather and to the inevitable decay of this part of the building. No literary evidence describes clearly their function so that we have to rely on Herodotus' perhaps fanciful information that the lofty sanctuary contained a beautifully decked-out bed and a golden table, but no image, and that a priestess chosen by the god slept there.⁵ Archaeological evidence informs us furthermore of monumental stairways leading to the upper parts of the tower while historical inscriptions of later periods describe the uppermost stage as faced with blue-colored enamelled bricks, and adorned with mighty copper horns indicating, perhaps, that an altar was the model for that story of the temple-tower.⁶

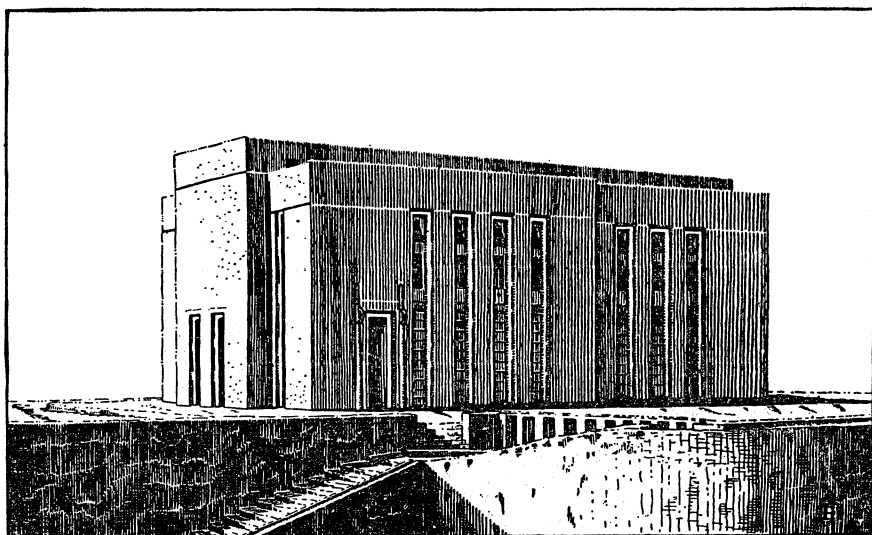


Fig. 8. The characteristic facade of this reconstructed temple is documented by numerous seal-cylinders. "Symbol"-poles usually flanked the entrance door; this decoration is so typical that we find it in the pictographical sign for "door." (V. Christian, *Altérumkunde des Zweistromlandes*, Pl. 95).

In the lower temple we have a central court surrounded by groups of

5. Both features of this description seem to have appealed to Herodotus; the absence of an image and the concept of sexual intercourse between a god and a human female. The first information was certainly reliable because the temple harbored only one image of its god; as to the second we have to bear in mind that Herodotus very likely had some fixed ideas about "Oriental mysteries" as can be seen from sundry effectually colored details in his descriptions of Babylonian and Egyptian customs. It is rather likely that he (consciously or unconsciously) transferred the information he received of the "Bed-Room", i. e. the part of sanctuary where the rite of the "Sacred Marriage" was enacted, to the mysterious shrine on top of the tower.
6. The idea that the deity alighted on the tower when descending from heaven to perform its epiphany before the "false door" in the lower temple lacks the support of any sort of architectural connexion between these two buildings. Yet, it should not be dismissed for that reason, which only appeals to our type of logical thinking. The Assyrians to whom the *siqurratu*-idea was originally alien, unmistakably stress this connexion in the temples built in Asshur, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, Kalhu and Khorsabad. It seems that these architects were free to express a relation which their Babylonian colleagues could not materialize, bound as they were by their traditions.

rooms of which the principal one, situated on the shady south-front, contained the image (Fig. 10). Here, in the reproduced living-room of the Babylonian private house, the sacred image stood on a low threshold-like step before a door-shaped recess in the wall and in front of the main door of the transverse room. This door led through one or two other transverse ante-rooms to the main court, where the worshipping crowd gathered to look through a monumental doorway, which presented the characteristic architecture of a city-gate, to the beautifully dressed image glowing in the darkness of the sanctuary. Only the servicing priests and those sacerdotal officials, termed "[those allowed to] enter the house", had access to it. Exception was made for the king of Babylon who entered the naos of Esagila (main temple of this city) once a year, at the New Year's festival, yet stripped of his regalia and as a humble and devout penitent. When, for example, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858-824 B. C.) came to Kutha in Babylon to worship the god Nergal he referred in his inscriptions⁷ to the pious act: "He humbly made the prostration at the door of the temple, offered his sacrificial lamb and gave the [required] gifts".⁸ Obviously the king was not permitted to enter the shrine.

The Assyrian temple has another origin and lacks — in its earlier and genuine forms — the central court holding the worshiper. The visitor to the house of god had to enter the room itself where the deity permanently dwelt. He stepped into the oblong sanctuary through a door in the longer wall, near the farther end of the room on the shorter wall of which the image was placed. Consequently, he had to turn to his right or left to behold the god enthroned on a platform and separated from the main room by a small partition formed by wall-ledges (Fig. 11). Under Babylonian influence the entrance was sometimes provided with flanking towers (imitating a city-gate) or placed in the shorter wall, creating thus — against the spirit of the building — a sequence of rooms strung on one central axis: anteroom, main room for the worshiper and adyton with the image.

The Assyrian deity was enthroned in the place of honor, far away from the entrance and not to be seen from the outside. As the master of the house it there received the visitor who reverently entered its room. The resulting intimacy was somewhat counteracted by the above-mentioned division of the main room, but was undoubtedly so intended by the architect. In this context it should be stressed that the Assyrian image seems to have been confined to its shrine before the ever increasing Babylonization, while the Babylonian gods quite frequently left their sanctuaries to be shown to the admiring crowd in the spacious temple-yards and in the streets. That the Assyrian images were kept in their abodes is expressly indicated, for example, by a passage of an inscription of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B. C.) who warned his successors not to bring the holy image of Ishtar (whose temple he had restored) to the profane light of day.⁹

7. Cf. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Vol. I, No. 624.

8. This description covers the typical features of a visit to the sanctuary. The frequent personal names of the type *pan ili amaru* "to see the face of the god" (cf. J. J. Stamm "Die akkadische Namengebung" in *MVAG* XLIV, 85 f.) show the religious import of such visits while the scarcity of personal names referring to temples (cf. loc. cit., 85 f., 203) squares with the conclusions reached in the present article.

9. Cf. Budge-King, *Annals of Assyrian Kings*, 165, rev. 5.

Before discussing the construction and appearance of these temples, short mention should be made of their most famous representatives. In the first place we have Esagila, the Marduk-temple (Tower of Babel) in Babylon of Bible-fame; the Ezida in Borsippa, whence Nabu, the son of Marduk, came annually to pay homage to his father; the Shamash-temples (called Ebabbar) of north and south Babylonia in Sippar and Larsa respectively, while Uruk (the biblical Erech) harbored the famous temple of Anu and Ishtar, the Eanna. The temple of the national god of Assyria stood in Asshur among many other shrines dedicated to Assyrian and Babylonian deities; a famous Ishtar-sanctuary in Arbela seems to have

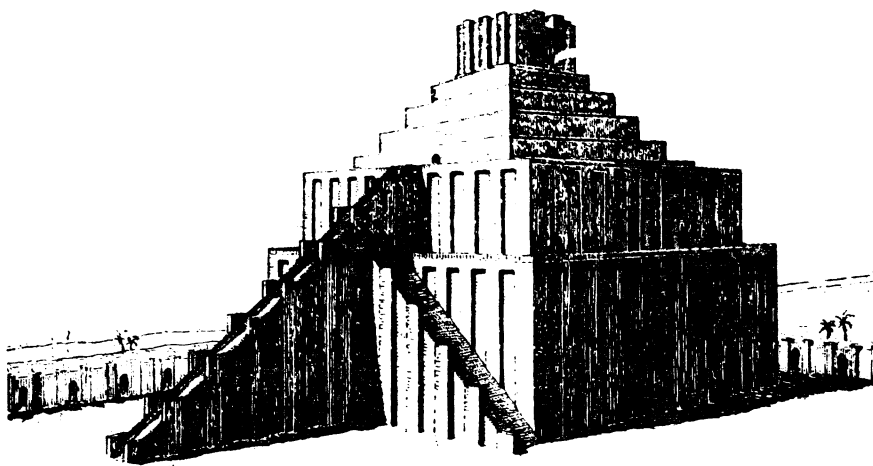


Fig. 9. The much discussed problems of the reconstruction of this temple-tower center around the arrangement of the upper stages, the angle of the lower and the access to the top sanctuary. (Th. Dombart, *Der babylonische Turm*, Taf. 1)

been a place of pilgrimage at the time of its revelling festivals.

The very heart of the temple was the place where the image had to stand; it was distinguished by deep foundations of kiln-fired bricks or clean sand, and protected by numerous magic figures imbedded in brick-cases. The orientation of the building¹⁰ was determined by the setting of the *libittu makhritu* ("first brick") which was placed ceremoniously on clean earth, surrounded by precious beads and anointed with perfumed oil. This brick was conceived as harboring the protective numina of the building, the "god", "goddess" and "genius" (*ilu, ishtar, Lamassu*) with which the temple was endowed like any living human being.¹¹ In case of a desecration of the sanctuary, necessitated by repair-work or reconstruction, the *libittu makhritu* had to be taken from its location by the

10. For this problem cf. G. Martiny, *Die Kultrichtung in Mesopotamien (Studien z. Bauforschung, Vol. III, 1932)*.

11. Cf. the texts published by F. Thureau-Dangin. *Rituels accadiens* for the details mentioned above.

temple-architect and brought to a ritually clean and secluded place in the open air. Here, penitential songs, continuous aspersions and fumigations were enacted for the sustenance of this "temple in exile" till it could be put in place again.

Architects and surveyors with their ropes and rods determined the outlines of the *temennu* (Sumerian: *temen*; cf. Greek: *temenos*), the foundation-platform in which was also to be deposited the foundation-document. In case of a rebuilding of a ruined temple the architects had to follow exactly, "neither projecting nor recessing a finger's breadth," the outlines of the old *temennu*, a custom of great advantage to the modern excavator, who finds layers upon layers of such foundations, like the pages of a book, laid by scores of pious generations.

The walls of sacred buildings were consistently made of sun-dried bricks, although the advantages of kiln-fired bricks were well known. The latter were frequently employed in secular buildings, but the conservatism of sacred architecture tends here, as everywhere, to retain antiquated techniques. The roof of the temple was made of timber stretched over the rooms, thus determining their width, since the temple-architects did not favor the use of supporting devices, such as columns, etc. Its inner side was magnificently decorated with metal inlays and incrustations. The last stage of the construction-work was reached when the door-openings were skillfully framed. Then the heavy doors, coated with sheets of copper or precious metals which the artist had engraved or embossed, were set in their hinges, and provided with heavy locks and strong ropes for their manipulation. The brick-walls were faced on both sides with white coatings often decorated with colored washes or other, more costly, mural decorations (mosaics, enamelled bricks, etc).¹²

When the work was completed, the image was brought in its new house in a solemn and jubilant procession. As a rule each image dwelt in a separate sanctuary: the principal god in the main room, the members of the divine family or the officials of the divine court in smaller shrines. Statues of kings and of private persons,¹³ in worshipping attitudes with pious dedicational inscriptions, sumptuous votive-offerings praising both the god and the donator, filled the sanctuary, together with multifarious sacred furniture such as altars, sacrificial tables, portable shrines, canopies, etc.¹⁴

The deity was conceived as living in the sanctuary just as the king lived in his palace. This is unmistakably expressed by the fact that the throne-rooms of the Babylonian and Assyrian palaces correspond exactly in their architectural features to the sanctuaries of the region. In Babylonia we have transverse rooms with the king visible from the court through a central door. In Assyria there were longitudinal rooms with the throne on

12. It might not be amiss to stress here the perishable nature of all that sumptuousness. Thorough and constant repair-work was vitally necessary to maintain the roof-cover and the protective coating of the brick-walls in good condition, but it was not able to prevent the deterioration and the final ruin of the temple, a situation which the kings so eloquently describe in their reports on the reconstruction of ruined sites.

13. Cf. the passage KAR 214:19-20.

14. The importance and role of the co-called "symbols"—special objects of religious worship in the temple—cannot be discussed here.

the smaller wall. The daily life of the image is also dominantly patterned on that of the king. In this regard we are fairly well informed by the ritual texts of the Seleucid period, and by the numerous administrative documents from Neo-Babylonian temple-archives. There is good reason to assume that the picture which these sources yield is also valid for the daily life of the king, of which we know little.

After having been awakened by a ceremonious assembly of minor deities, the image is furnished water for its morning toilet, then clothed and decked out with sumptuous garments, crowns, etc., according to the requirements of the day's ceremonies; it is served twice or three times a day a plentiful repast on exquisite and precious plates; it receives the

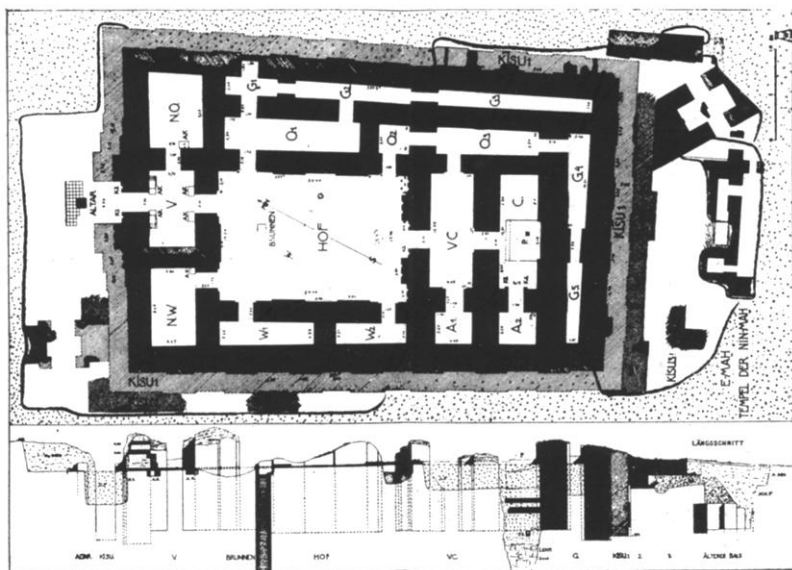


Fig. 10. This map shows the typical ground-plan of a Babylonian temple. Note the narrow corridor separating the cella from the outer wall; this architectural feature is rather frequent and seems to have had a definite purpose (requirements of the ritual or protection of the image against house-breaking?). (Koldewey, *Die Tempel von Babylon und Borsippa*, Taf. III)

visits of the members of its family or court, and was led on festival occasions through the streets of its town to rites performed in out-of-door sanctuaries, or carried in a festive cortege to nuptials with its divine spouse. It was not even refused the truly royal pleasure of hunting in its game-cover.¹⁵

Many, and certainly the most impressive, of these scenes were enacted by the priests before throngs of admiring worshipers which saw the beautifully decorated golden or wooden images carried around on magnificent platforms (Fig. 12) in huge processions with appropriate musical

15. Cf. the Assyrian letter Harper ABL 366.

accompaniment. The priests were well aware of the propaganda value of such a display of wealth and pomp. As a matter of fact the entire architectural set-up of the Babylonian sanctuary is actually based on the very same trend of thought. The image is effectually displayed to the gaze of the worshiper by placing it in a shallow room opposite a monumental door shaped like a city-gate in order to create a magnificent frame for the statue.

For the worshiper, however, this priestly concept of the relation between the divine and the human had serious consequences. Though he could admire with religious awe the glamour of the displayed image in the background of the sanctuary, he was forever separated from it by the unsurmountable barrier which excluded him from the shrine.¹⁶ Though he was able to enjoy in the thronging crowd some fleeting glimpses of the age-old statues carried hither and yon in elaborate but unintelligible ceremonies, he could only expect to be asperged by the priests with some drops of the water which was sanctified by the supposition that the image had touched it when washing its hands after the repast. Apart from that he could take part only in the collective and periodical ecstasy of joyous festivals of thanksgiving and in the traditional mournings where there was no room nor time for the intense subtlety which links the individual to his god. No deeply spiritual bond could emerge under the circumstances just described. The "house of god" was separated from the ever fertile fostering soil of individual religious intensity, and the same chasm gaped between the temple and the worshiper as between the king's palace and the mass of loyal subjects.

TEMPLE AND COMMUNITY IN MESOPOTAMIA

But the sanctuary was not the only building of the extensive temple-complex. The latter contained within its girdle-walls the living-quarters of the numerous priests who directed and performed the ceremonies, accompanied them with song and music, manufactured the costly utensils of the cult, and cared for the maintenance of the sanctuary itself. Furthermore there were schools and libraries where the young priests were trained and prepared for their duties and there the scholars worked, copying old tablets and keeping the lore of their calling alive. Besides all this there were large warehouses, workshops, granaries, and stables where the immense wealth of the deity was stored, administered, and increased by a special body of competent priests. This part of the temple meant far more to the average Babylonian than the admired splendour of the sanctuary, and interfered far more with his daily life. The economic weight of this institution was a tangible reality in the city-state, and its powerful influence was felt in every domain of the political, social, and economic life of the community.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the development of the temple as an economic institution. Suffice it to state that its tap-roots disappear in the darkness of the prehistoric period, into that protoplasmic

16. Cf. note 8 for the importance of the optical impression.

state of Mesopotamian social organization where the offices of the king and the (high-) priest were still united in one and the same person. The ensuing schism left the temple provided with enough land and serfs to ensure its economic prosperity, yet to a certain extent subject to the secular royal authority. The latter is clearly borne out by the fact that from a very early period the Babylonian king appointed the high-priest of the city's temple, although he himself was not permitted to enter the sanctuary but once a year and then only after having been humiliated by the very same priest. It is furthermore remarkable that, until the last period, the board of sacerdotal officials which ran the temple-organization, had to include a representative of the king. It was the latter's duty to control the transac-

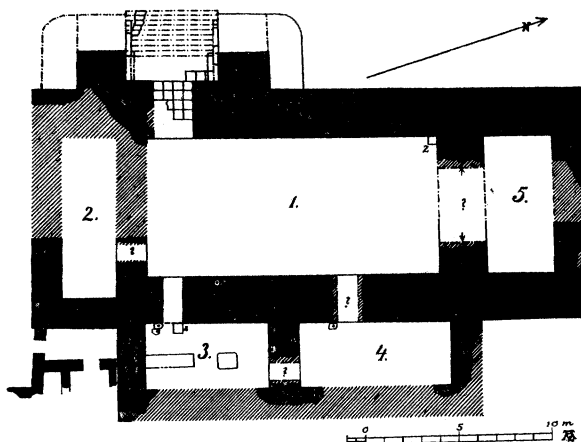


Fig. 11. Note the stress put on the entrance of this typical Assyrian sanctuary in which, however, heavy wall-ledges contribute to create a "Babylonizing" transversal room for the image in the axis of the longitudinal main-room. (W. Andrae, *Die archaischen Ischtartempel*, Taf. 7 a)

tions of the temple and to pay the royal taxes or else to obtain special charters from the king granting freedom of taxation for the sanctuary and its possessions. Although this peculiar relation between the secular and the religious authorities could have tended to cause friction or at least to have created a tension between them, it can be stated that they lived in astonishing harmony throughout the two and a half millennia recorded in the extant texts. Though this impression may be partly caused by our restricted knowledge of Babylonian history,¹⁷ the basic attitude between palace and temple was obviously that of collaboration and mutual ideological assistance.

Economically, the temple fared very well: a steady stream of royal gifts (partly spoils of war) and endowments, together with the offerings

17. Beyond a thin and not even always coherent network of king-names and a meagre array of historical facts (of varied importance) only little is known of the Babylonian history.

brought in by the pious poor extended more and more the landed property of the temple, filled its warehouses, added glamour to its sanctuaries, and lightened the burden of taxation. An efficient administration, controlled by a highly developed and extensive bureaucracy, could not but increase the accumulated wealth. On the fertile soil and fat pastures the countless serfs and slaves of the temple were working. In the efficiently equipped workshops they produced not only for the needs of the deity and the priests but manufactured also export-goods in order to buy in foreign countries the coveted precious metals, stones and timber which nature had denied to Babylonia. It is easy to imagine how such a thriving and ambitious institution influenced the economic life of its city by creating the pattern and showing the effects of international trade and commercial efficiency, not to speak of the work and money it procured for the merchants, craftsmen, and artists of the city.

Another and equally influential side of the temple's activities deserves notice here. Owing most probably to their common roots the temple felt and accepted, just as the palace did, the responsibilities incumbent upon it by virtue of its social and economic predominance. It therefore endeavored to correct in some ways the grievances of the economically underprivileged. It attempted to standardize the system of measurements whose irregularities constituted a severe burden on farmers and other debtors. It tried to reduce the rate of interest, the fluctuations of which were constantly in favor of the creditor, or at least to set an example of what should be normal. It also tried to regulate the money-market by granting loans without interest in special cases. Without the backing of legal enforcements these reformatory trends were certainly as inefficient as the corresponding efforts of the kings to control the prices of the standard commodities. Yet, such postulations, theoretical and propagandistic though they actually were, bear eloquent witness to a concept of social responsibility devoid of religious connotations.

The reader of the preceding pages in which we have tried to outline the tenor of the relations between the temple (as a religious and an economic institution) and the individual, will certainly have observed that we were dealing for the most part with the situation in Babylonia. The important question now arises whether the archaeological and literary data of the Assyrian region offer the same picture.

With regard to the ground-plan of the genuine Assyrian sanctuary we have already shown that it was basically different from that of the Babylonian. Instead of the stage-like display of the image, the Assyrian architects wanted to shelter the god in the remotest part of the oblong sanctuary, thus inviting the worshiper to enter the divine abode. There, one room enclosed both the god and the man, endowing this meeting between the divine and the human with an unmistakable atmosphere of intimacy. Such an atmosphere, created by the architect and willed by the worshiper, betokens the altogether different Assyrian concept of the relations between the "house of god" and its visitor.

As to the literary evidence, it unfortunately offers only scarce information for two reasons: first, the administrative documents of the temple-

archives, which constitutes our foremost source of information in Babylonia, are all missing and the extant rituals offer little insight into our field of interest. Secondly, a consistent and steadily increasing process of Babylonization has produced a nearly solid overcast which hides most of the specifically Assyrian features, especially in the realm of religious thought. Only two salient facts can be mentioned here without too much detailed discussion: the fact that the Assyrian king was also the high-priest of the national god, thus linking palace and temple by means of his person; and the fact that the Assyrians did not believe that the sanctuary was the only place of divine presence. They offered sacrifices and prayers to divine beings dwelling on mountain-tops, in sacred groves, and near the sources of rivers.

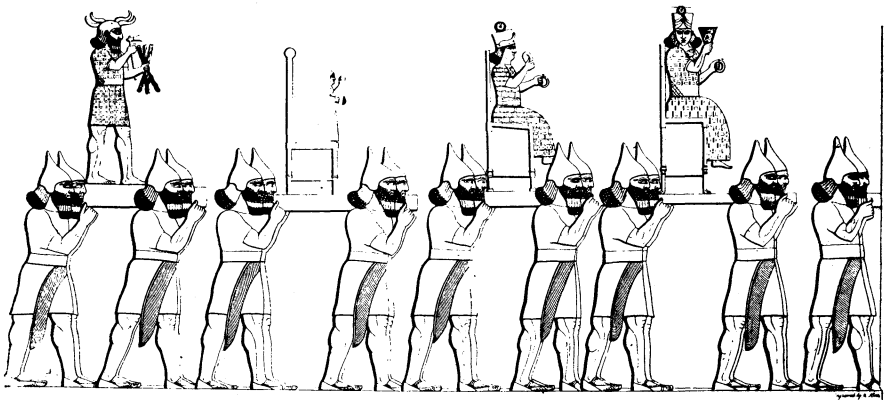


Fig. 12. Assyrian warriors carry four images on heavy poles. The god alone can be determined: the hammer-like axe and the double lightening-bolt characterize him as a "Weather-God." The insignia of the goddesses are not characteristic enough to determine their nature. Note the image in a shrine (Akk. **Shamu** "heaven") and the strange fact that the face of the first image is shown frontally. (A. H. Layard, **Monuments of Niniveh** I, Pl. 65)

All this betrays the existence of a specific Assyrian religiosity of which little is yet known and which definitely differs from the religious concepts of the Babylonians. It seems to have been pervaded with the same intensity that patently animates the impetuous energy of the entire Assyrian civilization, so different from the reclusive stability and equipoise of the Babylonian.

